

This is the ninth letter.

I've never loved riding the bus. Some do. I'm not among them. From city buses when I was at school to the occasional Greyhound when I was homeless, to the ubiquitous, spine shattering, gut wrenching marshrutky (sort of a "people's communal taxi" from the Ukrainian word marshrut – route) that flood Ukrainian cityscapes – my relationship with riding the bus has never risen much above the level of tense.

Marshrutky, in particular. They are, apparently, the training ground for too many Ukrainian bus drivers. Immediately recognizable by their yellow-caked-with-grime shaped like a Sara Lee poundcake profile, they seat 20 but never carry less than 45 passengers. Their self-employed Ukrainian drivers/owners are looking to optimize fares and so pack folks in. They creak and groan across the breadth and length of Ukraine apparently maintenance-free, for I have rarely had a ride in one that was not only terrifying but that felt like it might rattle apart into a million mismatched bits by ride's end.

I am Steve Martin in *Trains, Plains, and Automobiles* when John Candy asks if he's ever traveled by bus. Martin grunts no and Candy assures him: "Your mood's probably not going to improve much."

And now I have crossed an international border in what was, in essence, a full-sized marshrutka. 84 of us in one bus.

We left at 10:00 p.m., twelve hours late. We arrived at the Polish border at 3:30 a.m. on Friday morning. There, it took us 9 hours to cross. I don't know why. Where we crossed there were no crowds, only the occasional car, a few refugees on foot. There were maybe 100 semi-trailers parked for the night, but that is their usual practice, and they cross through a separate checkpoint. There were 6 tour buses in front of us. Yet, in the manner of eastern European phenomenon that approaches the level of divine mystery, it still took us more than 9 hours to complete the remaining 300 meters of the border control area and across the imaginary blue line into Poland.

We expected delays. What we didn't expect was the initial leg from Ternopil, Ukraine to the Polish border—normally a 2 ½ hour drive—taking 5 ½ hours. We didn't expect the extra 45 minutes tacked on when the driver forgot 5 passengers and had to turn around and go back to the start to pick them up. We didn't expect the trip from the border to Warsaw, normally 3 ½ hours, to take 6. And once we'd arrived in Cracow just before 10:00 that night and made it to our room just after 11:00, we didn't expect Boyrs, our six-year-old to wake up in the middle of the night with food poisoning. He spent the next day miserable and vomiting, as we made our way from Cracow to Prague first by yet another bus, and finally train.

But then, when we pulled into Prague we were met by Mark and Leslie Slouka at the station and we were safe. They rushed Boyrs to the hospital and within an hour, (and certainly, a shorter hour than our marshrutka bus driver, daylight already failing, spent on a smoking break after we'd made it into Warsaw) Mark had navigated the labyrinth of Czech hospital admission procedure and our Boyrs was on an IV-drip and slowly turning a little less green.

There are good people in the world. We have been led into the arms of two of the best. An 8-year-old, a 6-year-old, and a couple of shellshocked parents hauling filthy backpacks have invaded their home and they are grace and mercy.

We are in Prague. The Slovaks are guiding us through this, arranging, rearranging, maintaining their poise with a lot like ours who has brought the stink of war into their home. And the thousands of you who have lifted up our names in prayer, who have written, have held us in your hearts—you have kept us sane, kept us close. You done good. We start over but we are safe.

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Back home things are impossible to read. Reading the reports, I am afraid. The noose tightens around Kyiv just as it seems to tighten around the creator of this chaos; Putin is running out of options. His pretext for war has crumbled, humiliations pile up on the battlefield, resistance grows at home, and his desperation is showing. He lashes out. He's now bombing in the west of the country. In the areas where Russian forces have taken a city, his troops are working to identify "foreign agents" in house-to-house searches. He is opening "green corridor" escape routes for Ukrainians, but only to the south-to Russian-occupied Crimea, or to the east, to Russia.

But the refugee numbers are telling: of the 2.2 million refugees to have fled, only 53,000 have gone to Russia. It reveals, I think, a human tendency as old as time: we move away from danger. Russia, under Putin, is danger. It is a criminal state with just enough perks to keep folks' minds off what is very wrong.

In an effort to understand what led to this, we look for reasons, for precedent, for logic. We're tempted to make comparisons. Prominent personalities leading lives of affluence and influence in the States, Britain, and other free nations opine with impressive confidence that "the West" created Putin.

Nonsense on stilts.

That corroded view of humanity Putin invokes in the prosecution of these atrocities is the creation of his own fevered brain. It is not the West that drives him to flatten Ukrainian villages and bomb Ukrainian maternity hospitals. It is not the west that fills him with hate for those he calls "one nation" with Russia. It is not the West that orders his troops to fire on Ukrainian citizens trying to evacuate a city. It is not the West that is rounding up Ukrainian "western agents and Nazis" working for humanitarian organizations.

And in this last example, it gets personal. My wife is fluent in three languages, conversant in more. She has a Master's in political science and has been the Head of Arts for most of the past 15 years at a global British organization working in Ukraine since its independence. She deals regularly with "decadent westerners" in the arts, writing contracts that bring, apparently, decadent British art & artists – writers, thinkers, dancers, theaters, graphic artists, filmmakers and professionals across the spectrum of the arts who help us all, in their best work, to look inside, to stop and consider the art of being humane. That's what she brings to Ukraine.

What does Putin bring?

Perhaps I'm too close to the situation. Is my wife evil? Or is she its target? For anyone who would suggest that a person like my Liliya, a person who has embraced what's best in the realm of human creative endeavor, is the *casus belli* for Putin's War, you need to look deep inside. You need to take a side. This is right from wrong. This is life or this is murder. This is peace or this is war.

Vladimir Putin threatens my home and my family.

To what degree we are lucky, to what degree we are blessed or to what degree we are deceived by corrosive propaganda from the evil west, I will not say. But we have evaded the threat for now. I will say, can say, only these: that Putin is his own man. And that now, my personal foreign agent / mother to my sons is now safely away from Putin's War with all her boys, here in Prague.

Best bus ride I've ever taken.